

J Building receives needed fixes

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A massive basement-to-roof makeover of Oregon State Hospital's oldest building promises to transform the unsafe eyesore into a gleaming landmark in central Salem, the state's top hospital replacement planner said Thursday.

Four years ago, state-hired consultants deemed the hospital's J Building unsafe and obsolete, warning that it could collapse in an earthquake.

Now, the oldest sections of the 126-year-old structure — cleared of asbestos and lead paint — are being reinforced with steel rebar, thick layers of sprayed concrete and new wooden beams.

Dangers posed by the aged, dilapidated building are fading away as the interior core of the structure gradually gets bulked up, said Linda Hammond, hospital replacement administrator.

"It has to pass the seismic review and meet fire and safety code, like any new building," she said. "It will be safe."

Plans call for more than half of the J Building — best known as the filming location for the 1975 movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" — to be razed to make way for a new \$280 million psychiatric hospital.

But the building's oldest sections, reinforced and remodeled, will be incorporated into the new facility

The J Building sections pegged for preservation are known as the Kirkbride U because of their shape and because the architectural features were developed by Dr. Thomas Kirkbride of Pennsylvania, who pioneered some of the first national standards for mental hospitals in the 19th Century.

Ongoing work on the Kirkbride U comes about a year after Hammond and other members of the hospital replacement team led public tours through decayed areas now being revamped.

Leading the makeover project is Hoffman Construction Co., a Portland firm hired by the state to build the 620-bed replacement hospital.

On Thursday, Hammond joined Lou Parker, Hoffman's superintendent for the J Building rehab project, in leading a reporter and a photographer on a guided tour through the busy construction zone. The tour started in the building's cavernous basement. That's where a creaking foundation weakened by water leaks and age has been bolstered with sprayed concrete and other materials.

"The walls look now like they can hold a building up," Hammond said. "There's a proper foundation."



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Restoration work continues Thursday on the third floor of the 126-year-old J Building of the Oregon State Hospital building.

Similar shoring-up work is taking place throughout the Kirkbride U. The revamped building is scheduled to open in early 2011.

Beds of roses will be planted in front of the restored building and flowering cherry trees will be planted along the north side of the structure, next to Center Street NE, Hammond said. In another decorative touch that honors hospital history, a long-mothballed fountain will be placed near the building's entrance.

Renovation of the Kirkbride U moves forward after history buffs and building preservationists succeeded in persuading hospital replacement planners to save the most historically significant portions of the J Building, including its distinctive tower.

Next month, the ornate cupola will be taken down for cleaning and a fresh coat of paint. About the same time, workers will start replacing the roof of the Kirkbride U.

Hammond praised Hoffman Construction for deftly handling the top-to-bottom overhaul of the Kirkbride U.

Early on, hospital replacement planners envisioned lifting the three-story structure off its foundation to make structural upgrades. Hoffman's project leaders nixed the idea, citing concerns about costs and safety. "That would have been scary," Parker said.

Alternative plans crafted by Hoffman employees shaved about \$2 million off the cost of the restoration project, Hammond said.

The remodeled Kirkbride U will include space for patient programs, administrative offices, a mental-health museum and a resting place for the unclaimed cremated remains of more than 3,000 patients who died at the hospital from the late 1880s to the mid-1970s.

A work group developing ideas for the museum probably will take steps to become a non-profit organization, then pursue grants to pay for museum-related work, Hammond said.

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What's next

Next month, Oregon State Hospital's distinctive tower, or cupola, will be taken down for cleaning and a fresh coat of paint. Plans call for the tower to be returned to its present location atop the hospital's J Building after completion of a roof-replacement project.